ABSTRACT

INDIA’S PALESTINE POLICY SINCE 1992

India has had a consistent and unwavering record of support for the Palestinian cause since the days of its freedom struggle. During the pre-independence period, the Indian attitude was represented by the Indian National Congress and its prominent leaders such as Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru. Gandhi believed that Palestine belongs to the Arabs in the same sense that England belongs to the English or France to the French. He rejected Zionism which was based on the assumption that the Jews all over world constitute a ‘nation’ and that by virtue of their religion alone they are the prospective citizens of Israel. For Nehru, Palestine “was not a wilderness or an empty uninhabited place. It was already somebody else home. He identified a similarity between the freedom struggles of India and the Palestinians on two grounds. First, both are national liberation movements against the British imperialism. Second, in India, the British sponsored the Muslim League to undercut Indian demands for independence. In Palestine, the British sponsored the Zionist movement to counter Arab claims for immediate independence. He suggested that only ‘on the stable foundation of Arab-Jews cooperation and the elimination of imperialism” the future of Palestine could be secured. This, he suggested, required that the Jews abandon their exaggerated claims and seek peaceful accommodation with the Palestinians.

Thus the INC and its leaders had consistently taken the Arab side on the Palestine question and assessed the entire issue from the India’s point of view. This is not without reason. One reason could be the Muslim population of India. This section of people had sympathised the cause of their co-religionists in Palestine. The
Congress could not ignore this fact. Another reason may be the Congress party’s uncompromising stand against colonialism. The Palestinian Arabs were placed under the British colonial rule after First World War and were struggling against the colonial power. The Congress was thus brought closer to the Palestinians. It is also possible that the secularist approach of the Congress to politics could be one reason to oppose Zionism and sympathise with the Palestinians. The Congress vehemently advocated secular politics. This made it see Zionism as a movement based on religion. Moreover, Zionism was seen as a tool to be used by the colonial and imperial power, which the Congress could not tolerate.

India’s historic and principled support to the Palestinian people during the freedom struggle continued even after independence. Moreover, Nehru’s assumption of power as the first Prime Minister of India as well as the Foreign Minister of the country added continuity to its post-independent Palestine policy.

In the initial period, India’s policy towards Palestine was consistently in conformity with the basic tenets of its foreign policy: anti-imperialism, anti-racism, support to the liberation struggles around the world, opposition to military occupation, solution of the international disputes through negotiation, a relentless struggle against neo-colonialism etc. In addition to these broad principles, India’s position with regard to Palestine was also guided by the general consensus in the Arab world, the Non-Aligned Movement and the United Nations.

Indian stand on Palestine had also a pragmatic dimension. The partition of India and the creation of an exclusively Muslim state of Pakistan, the subsequent Kashmir problem, the Pakistani attempts to bring about a Pan-Islamic Alliance stretching from Turkey to Pakistan (the emergence of an Anti-India Islamic bloc with Pakistan as its leader) and the fear of the Indian leaders that the Muslim population
of India could identify with pan-Islamism that could rise out of the Arab-Israeli conflict influenced India to forge a conscious policy towards the Arab-Israeli conflict over Palestine. Nehru viewed this pan Islamic tendency as regressive and counterproductive as it could divide and weaken the movement of the Asian people against the imperialist states. Similarly, Nehru did not want Arab-Israeli conflict to affect the Muslim populace of India by giving additional boost to the pan-Islamic and separatist element among them.

India’s provided support to the Palestine issue both at the international forums like the UN and NAM and at the bilateral level after the PLO emerged as a significant force in the post 1973 Arab Israeli war period.

In the UN General Assembly, India voted against the partition of Palestine along with the Arabs countries. Two reasons can be given for the Indian stand. First, since the leaders of the Indian National Congress were against the two nation theory and opposed the partition of India on religious ground, it then followed that India was against the partition of Palestine on such grounds. Second, since the Indian leaders had always supported the Palestinian Arabs, they were unable to take a stand against them all of a sudden. India therefore wanted the Jews and Arabs to work out their differences within one Federal State of Palestine but this was not possible since the relations between Zionists and Arabs were unbridgeable by that time.

Soon after its establishment on 14 May 1948, Israel applied for admission to the UN and the matter was put to vote. India’s first reaction was to abstain but later India chose to vote against Israel. This was because ‘India could not recognise a state which had been achieved through the force of arms and not through negotiations. India, however, recognised Israel on 17 September 1950, after more than years of its creation and after two Muslim majority countries, Turkey and Iran,
had accorded recognition. Nehru, however, made it clear that recognition did not mean endorsement of Israeli position on its frontiers and India would continue to support the cause of the Palestinians.

During the Suez Crisis in October 1956, India denounced Israeli aggression as a fragrant violation of UN Charter and in opposition to all principles laid down in Bandung Conference. India also cosponsored resolutions in the General Assembly urging the immediate withdrawal of French, British and Israeli forces from Egypt. Suez crisis had, however, brought in a major impact on India’s policy perspective on West Asia. Though it did not make any direct implication on India’s Palestine policy, it hardened India’s attitude towards Israel and brought Egypt and India closer to each other.

The border dispute between the Arabs and Israel led to the escalation of another war in West Asia in 1967. Although the closure of Gulf of Aquaba by Nasser and the ordering of the withdrawal of United Nations Emergency Force were the immediate reasons for the escalations of war in 1967, India took a blatantly pro-Arab position during the crisis. At the UN where India was a non-permanent member of the Security Council, its representative, G Parthasarathy placed the responsibility for the ‘grave situation’ prevailing in West Asia’s squarely on Israel. During the 1973 war, India also extended full support to the Arabs. Though Egypt and Syria had launched a coordinated attack on Israel, the Indian government held Israel responsible for encouraging the Arab countries to do so as Israel had refused to vacate the territories occupied by force.

Meanwhile, in the post-1973 war period, India gradually moved away from the policy of supporting individual Arab countries on Palestine issue to back the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) led by its Chairman Yasser Arafat.
Following the Algiers declaration, India co-sponsored a draft resolution in the UN General Assembly, on October 8, 1974 calling for the PLO’s participation in the deliberations of the General Assembly on Palestinian issue. It was the continuous efforts of India and other like-minded countries the PLO acquired observer status in the UN in 1974. India also joined as a co-sponsor of General Assembly Resolution 3379, which equated Zionism with racism in November 1975.

As a founder member of the Non-Aligned Movement, India also played a very important role in setting the NAM’s anti-colonial agenda that included strong support to the liberation movements around the world including the one led by the Palestinians. In addition, India highlighted the problems of the Palestine people at different NAM summits starting from the first NAM summit at Belgrade in 1961 and also constantly supported the PLO in its diplomatic bid to become a full member of the NAM. It was also due to the continuous efforts of India and other Non-Aligned Nations, Palestine formally entered into the NAM as a full member in August 1976.

At the bilateral level, India decided to directly deal with the PLO. In 1969, the Al Fatah delegation visited India at the invitation of the Indian association for Afro-Asian solidarity. In December 1974, about 30 MPs demanded the granting of diplomatic status to the PLO to coincide with the tenth anniversary of the ‘Palestine Revolution’. On January 10, 1975, India became the first Non-Arab country to recognize the PLO as the sole and legitimate representative of the Palestinian people and permitted it an independent office at New Delhi which paved the way for an official Palestinian presence in India. When Janata party came to power in 1977 after internal Emergency, there were speculations about a possible shift in India’s Palestine policy. Belying all expectations, the Janata Government reaffirmed India’s support to the Arabs in general and Palestinians in particular and was supportive of
any peace initiative between Arabs and Israel. In 1980, Indira Gandhi returned to power with a thumping majority and continued her support to the Palestinian struggle. Her Foreign Minister P.V Narasimha Rao announced in Parliament on 26th March 1980 that India had decided to accord full diplomatic recognition to the office of the PLO in New Delhi by upgrading its office to that of an embassy endowed with all diplomatic immunities and privileges.

In the Algiers Declaration of November 15, 1988, the PLO declared its belated acceptance of the 1947 partition plan and proclaimed the “state of Palestine.” India became one of the first countries to recognize the state of Palestine and received PLO Chairman Yasser Arafat as a head of state.

Though India has always extended full support to the Arabs on the Palestine issue, the Government of India’s policy on the Arab Israel conflict remained a subject of deep dispute by the opposition political parties—the right wing Jan Sangh and the Swatantra Party and the middle of the road Praja-Socialist Party (PSP) and the Samyukta Socialist Party (SSP)—, the national media and the informed Indian citizens. The Congress party itself was also divided on the issue and even senior cabinet ministers had been known to entertain serious reservations regarding the unqualified support extended by the Prime Minister and the External Minister to various moves made by the West Asian nations on different occasions. There are several reasons for opposing India’s all out and automatic support for the Arab countries. The first reason was that when the chips were down between India and Pakistan, all Arab countries supported the latter irrespective of the merits of the dispute because of religious considerations. Another reason for opposition was that India’s ‘one sided’ policy on Arab Israel conflict was inconsistent with its avowed foreign policy of non-alignment. The third criticism hinged on the concept of
reciprocity in international relations. The contention in connection with West Asia was that since most Arab countries took up a neutralist stance at the time of the Chinese aggression in 1962 and tended to side with Rawalpindi at the time of the Indo-Pakistan war in 1965 & 1971, New Delhi was under no moral obligation to support them in their dispute with Israel. The fourth reason for criticism was that if India clearly identified with one side in a conflict, it could hardly have any leverage in helping to bring about a settlement in the Arab-Israel conflict. The fifth reason for opposing India’s West Asia policy arose from the misplaced ‘fear of the Government that if India displeased the Arabs, the latter would take the side of Pakistan and will eventually support Pakistan’s demand for Kashmir. Finally, it was argued that the Arabs and the Palestinians had made a historic ‘mistake’ in rejecting the 1947 UN General Assembly Resolution 181, which paved the way for the partition of the British-ruled mandate Palestine.

Although it is difficult to dismiss all the points mentioned above, the question is had India not followed a pro-Arab policy as it did over the years what would have been the consequences? Certainly the consequences of a change of policy would have been highly adverse for India. It would have earned the hostility of all Arab countries irrespective of their internal differences including India’s trade relationship and oil imports from the region, confirmed the unhappy and erroneous impression in the Soviet bloc that India had for all practical purposes abandoned the policy of non-alignment, facilitated the task of Pakistani and Chinese diplomacy in isolating India in the Third World, created an anti-Soviet alliance of the Muslim countries of West Asia by the West with Pakistan cast in a leading role which would have acquired strong religious and therefore anti-India overtones and alienated the Muslim intelligentsia at home. However, the situation in West Asian witnessed a sea change when Iraq
invaded Kuwait in August 1990. It was during this period the Soviet Union was disappearing from the world map marking the era of unipolar world dominated by the United States, the remaining Super Power. In the meantime, the P.L.O. lost its political leverage on account of its support to Saddam Hussain. The United States took the initiative of holding international Middle East Peace Conference immediately after expelling Iraq out of Kuwait in 1991. This marked new era in West Asia due to different varieties of diplomatic manoeuvring. As a consequence to these developments, India also made drastic changes in its policy towards West Asia. It established full diplomatic relations with Israel in January 1992, after 40 years it recognized that country.

The Rao Government’s decision to normalize ties with Israel, however, did not happen all of a sudden. The move in this direction was undertaken in mid-1980 when Rajiv Gandhi, known for his non-ideological approach to foreign policy, met his Israeli counterpart Shimon Pares during the annual UN General Assembly session in September 1985. Other events such as hosting the Israeli team for the quarter-final of the Davis Cup Tennis Tournament in July 1987, his meeting with a group of Jewish leaders during his US trip in June 1988, the hosting of an Anti Defamation League delegation as well as US Congressman Stephen Solarz in January 1989, all contributed towards a rethinking of his policy towards Israel. The kidnapping and murder of some Israeli tourists in Jammu and Kashmir in June 1991, just few days after Narasimha Rao assumed power, provided the Government an opportunity to deal with a humanitarian crisis along with the Israeli Government. On 16 December 1991, India voted with the majority of UN members in repealing the 1975 General Assembly Resolutions equating Zionism with racism. During this time, the Indian media, both electronic and print, started what could be termed as a concerted
campaign for normalization of relationship with Israel. Spearheaded by the well-known strategic expert–turned-academic C. Raja Mohan, the pragmatists saw normalization within the context of the emerging post–Cold War global order. They argued that the earlier justifications for an anti-Israeli policy had crumbled and urged India to recognise and capitalise the new Middle Eastern reality opened up by the 1991 Gulf War that dispelled any doubts as to where the loyalties of the oil-rich Arab monarchies laid, in spite of their many grievances against the United States and the Madrid Peace Conference. The country’s opposition parties also maintained a pro-Israeli stand and kept a constant pressure on the government to establish diplomatic relations with Israel. The traditionalists who strongly opposed any diplomatic move towards Israel and favoured status quo on moral and humanitarian grounds put forward equally powerful counter-arguments in this regard.

However, with the change of the international scenario caused by the end of the Cold War, the disintegration of the Soviet Union, the emergence of the United States as the only super power, the pragmatists got an upper hand in the foreign policy debate as the Government began negotiations over normalisation of ties with the Jewish state. Other factors like the liberalisation of the Indian economy, the change of PLO’s strategy towards Israel, the start of the Middle East peace process, India’s delinking of Pakistan from its Middle East policy, the rising problem of terrorism in the country and the change in India’s domestic politics also influenced India’s decision. The response and reaction to this decision was however different in different quarters. The commencement of diplomatic relationship was greeted both by the US and Israel. The Arab press greeted the news with a mute reaction mentioning that it was not ‘unexpected and dramatic’ since efforts had been building up in that direction over the last few months. However, in India, the reaction was
mixed. While the political parties like the BJP and Shiv Sena hailed the move, others such as the CPI, Janata Dal were critical of the move. Indian media, intellectuals and religious leaders were equally divided on the issue.

Although India’s relation with Israel started at a low profile during the Congress regime, the relations between the two countries reached new heights during the BJP led National Democratic Alliance regime of Atal Bihari Vajpayee (1998-2004). When the United Progressive Alliance Government under the Congress leadership came to power in mid-2004, it decided to follow the same line of the policy adopted by the earlier NDA regime. The growing ties between India and Israel and its consequent effect on New Delhi’s posture towards Palestine have generated another lively debate in the country. There are two different viewpoints on this issue. According to one view, India’s growing ties with Israeli has neutralised its traditional support to the Palestine issue. The other view argues that India’s friendship with Israel has not affected its support to the Palestinian cause. A careful examination of the whole issue makes two things clear: First, since the end of the Cold War and the disintegration of the Soviet Union, the world has changed dramatically and so also the perception and attitude of Arab countries towards Israel. This is evident in their recognition of Israel and participation in the Middle East peace process. India’s changed posture towards Israel was the result of these altered circumstances. Second, there is a tendency among scholars to interpret everything through a zero-sum approach i.e., Palestine’s gain is Israel’s loss and vice versa. Palestinians would not get anything if India condemns Israel all the time and completely disengages the Jewish State. What is actually important is to use India’s leverage vis-à-vis Israel and work towards a just and fair solution of the Palestine problem.
After establishing diplomatic relationship with Israel in 1992, India continued to support the cause of Palestine. At the political and diplomatic level, India provided strong support to the people of Palestinian in their quest for a sovereign, independent and viable state, economically India provided both material and technical support to the Palestinian government and its people in their search for nation-building. The Palestinian President, Yasser Arafat frequently visited India, so also other high level dignitaries. After Arafat’s death, the new Palestinian President, Mahmoud Abbas, accompanied by several ministers visited New Delhi in May 2005, October 2008 and in February 2010. From the Indian side, the Union Home Minister, the External Affairs Minister, the Minister of State for External Affairs and other senior officials visited Palestine.

Besides supporting the cause of Palestine through several bilateral visits, India also espoused the cause of Palestine at various international forums such as the UN and NAM. It also provided much needed economic, technical and humanitarian assistance to the PNA, especially after its establishment in 1994 in pursuance of the Oslo principles. India also continues to financially contribute to the UN Relief Works Agency (UNRWA) for undertaking relief work in the occupied Palestinian territories from time to time. Besides, the Government of India has recognised the passport/ travel documents issued by the PNA and established a Representative Office to the Palestine National Authority which is working since June 1996 which was shifted to Ramallah in 2003.

However, the Government’s claim that it continues to provide diplomatic and political support to the Palestinians in their effort to have a separate homeland and help them in “the reconstruction of their nation" through economic, technical and humanitarian assistance from time to time, has not been shared by a number of
leaders, scholars, journalists and activists who on the contrary argue that India’s support Palestine has now been reduced to mere statements, resolutions and occasional economic assistance. In other words, it is clear that India, under the given circumstances, is no longer supporting the national struggle movements that it used to do in the past. In the garb of so called ‘pragmatism’, India is steadily getting sucked into the vortex of Western design and quagmire. Whether India is under the NDA or UPA rule, the Government has diluted the country’s principled foreign policy for certain interests that are not going to pay it in the long run.

In addition to the Government support, the people of India have always come forward in support of the Palestine issue. This is evident from the numerous campaigns and demonstrations against Israel's actions in Palestine by several civil society groups from time to time. Moreover, frequent seminars and conferences have also been organised in the country in the recent past to raise awareness and garner support for the just cause of Palestine.

India has also played a limited role in the Middle East peace process to solve the problem of Palestine. It was invited to become a participant in the multilateral track of the Peace Process that began in 1991 and actively participated in all the five working groups discussing Middle East-Palestine question such as regional economic development, arms control and regional security and environment and water resources. India welcomed the mutual recognition by the State of Israel & the PLO and the signing of the Palestinian-Israeli agreement on Palestinian self-rule on 13 September 1993. It welcomed the signing of the Israel-PLO agreement in Cairo on 4th May 1994 (also known as Gaza-Jericho Agreement). An Indian delegation led by the Minister of State for External Affairs, R.L Bhatia was present during the
signing ceremony. India also greeted the Oslo Interim Agreement (Oslo II) signed on 30th September 1995 and reiterated the view that durable peace in the region was necessary to resolve all outstanding issues to the satisfaction of all concerned parties. Terming the Wye River Memorandum signed between Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and PLO Chairman Yasser Arafat on 23 October 1998 as ‘an important milestone’ in the stalled peace process, India supported its unconditional implementation. The Indian Trade and Industry Minister Ashwani Kumar participated in the Sharm El Sheikh summit in February 2005 between Israeli and Palestinian leaders to end the 2000 Intifada and resume negotiations under the roadmap.

The summit. India was invited as a participant in the Annapolis Conference which was held on November 27, 2007 and Kapil Sibal, the Minister for Science and Technology and Earth Sciences, represented the country at Annapolis.

In recent years, there is a growing perception that India should play a more direct and mediatory role in the Israel Palestine Peace process. While India has shown some interest in the regard and this is welcomed by the Israelis and the Palestinians, the domestic discourse on India’s new role is sharply divided. There are four different discourses: the Radicals, the Nehruvians, the pragmatists and the status quoits. The Radicals want India to fully support the Palestine issue, end all cooperation with Israel and call for a combination of global isolation, sanctions and external pressure against the Jewish country by the international community. The Nehruvians want India to provide more vigorous support and play an active role in the peace process because unlike in the past, it is now in a better position to play such a role. They support an active role for India in the Palestine issue because the Palestinians are not only fighting for a just and humanitarian cause but there has also not been any change on the ground situation in the occupied territories. The
pragmatists, like the Nehruvians, want India to play a leading role in the peace process but for the sake of its own rising power profile and national interest. According to the status-quoits, India should not change its present policy of keeping a low profile in the Middle East peace process because such a posture better serves its national interests. In other words, the status-quoits maintain that India should continue to resist any temptation to play any overt role in the peace process as it helps to maintain normal ties with all parties to the Middle East conflict without forcing the country into unpleasant situations. In view of these differing perceptions, the real challenge for India in future would be to balance its domestic concerns with the actual requirements at its extended neighbourhood.